Chou En-lai and the Opening to America

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CHOU EN-LAI AND THE OPENING TO AMERICA

When President Richard Nixon visited China in February 1972, the world applauded his boldness in reformulating America's China policy. However, the United States had to have a willing partner--China. Both international and domestic events would have pushed China to some accommodation with the US, but the presence of a singularly gifted leader, Chou En-lai, contributed to a breakthrough. A keen strategic thinker, he found an ideal counterpart in the American national security advisor, Henry Kissinger. Working independently at first, the two men evaluated existing policies and concluded that a rapprochement was in order. Together, they set the stage for the successful Nixon visit which established the foundation for a new relationship between China and the US. Much has been made of the contributions of Kissinger and Nixon, but a review of Chou's role and statecraft, as described in American sources, shows how he, in Kissinger's words, "rescued an element of choice from the pressure of circumstance."

THE ENVIRONMENT: A CHANGING WORLD

The world which Chou En-lai faced between 1968 and 1972 was changing rapidly. Despite the progress which had been made since 1949, China faced serious problems. Domestically, the Cultural Revolution may have institutionalized the Maoist concepts of revolution and Marxism, but it had created great upheavals in Chinese society and the economy. A generation had been lost in education. The economy was

under severe strain. China would need technology and perhaps capital from the West if economic development were to continue. Within the Communist Party, Chou faced a continuing struggle with hardliner Lin Piao. The party had not yet resolved such issues as the selection of a successor generation of leaders, the tensions between centralization and decentralization in governmental structures, or the dichotomies between traditional Chinese values-which tended to be particularist and xenophobic--and a universalist communist ideology.

Internationally, China's long simmering dispute with the Soviet Union had erupted in March 1969 into open fighting along the Ussuri River. Following the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to end the Prague Spring, the Chinese had rejected the Soviet concept of "limited sovereignty" within the socialist camp. Some Third World countries were annoyed with China's continued support for insurgent revolutionary movements. The United States was bogged down in a seemingly endless war with Vietnam, China's ancient rival. China had initially encouraged the war, but with the arrival of the Americans, the Soviet Union had stepped in to aid the Vietnamese, leaving China with little influence on events. Japan was growing ever more dominant in east Asia. In south Asia, the border with India, the site of a short conflict in 1962, remained a concern. China had good relations with Pakistan, but Soviet influence in India appeared to be growing. Finally, during the Cultural Revolution, embassies had shrunk to skeleton staffs, and Chinese representatives had rarely attended international meetings. Hence, China's prestige was not commensurate with either its geographical or demographic size. In short, the

international environment was dangerous. Domestic problems limited China's ability to project power. Chou had to find a strategy which would limit risks.

CHOU'S RESPONSE: A NEW STRATEGY

Given these difficult circumstances, China was fortunate to have Chou as its Prime Minister. Called by Kissinger one of the most impressive men he ever met, Chou understood realpolitik. Yet, he also had impeccable communist credentials, for he had been a party leader for over 50 years, Prime Minister for 22, and Foreign Minister for nine. He had been with Mao Tse-tung on the Long March. He was, as Kissinger later wrote, "a man of history."

Chou saw an emerging multipolar world. This multipolarity related well to the Chinese view of three zones--the superpowers; the intermediate zone, which included what Western analysts would call the great powers of Europe plus China and Japan; and the Third World. In such a multipolar world, security was China's key interest. Both the U.S. and the USSR were threats: The US as the force of imperialism, the USSR as the force of socialist imperialism. While the relationship between the two superpowers might be contentious in the long term, they might, in the short term, collude to establish hegemony. Then, the Soviets would be an even greater threat to China. They could support internal insurgency or even launch a preemptive nuclear attack.

Hence, Chou's goal was an equilibrium in the international

balance of power and containment of the Soviet Union. Ideally, the United States and the Soviet Union would be so embroiled that China could have a free ride, but Chou recognized that the Americans would be unwilling to accept such a situation, because they preferred maintaining an equal distance between the Soviet Union and China. Thus, he would work to secure a balance where a sweeping detente would be avoided, to make detente as costly as possible to other Soviet relationships, to put the superpowers on the defensive vis-a-vis the rest of the world, and to align China with the Third World.

Chou had other goals beyond security. He wished to reestablish Chinese prestige. A rapprochement with the US would enable China to:

--enter the United Nations and acquire the Chinese seat on the Security Council

--alter relations with Japan, including diplomatic recognition, under conditions of maximum advantage

--secure recognition from other American allies who continued to have relations with Taipei, and

--eventually resolve the question of Taiwan.

As a communist leader, Chou also wanted to ensure that China was well positioned to promote the spread of Chinese ideology throughout the world. Supporting insurgencies might be out, but opportunities to influence Third World leaders and fledging communist parties remained. Lastly, Chou undoubtedly wanted to reap any possible economic benefits. If, as Scalapino writes, one goal was a "rich country and a strong soldiery," Chou would have wanted the earnings which increased foreign trade and technology transfers could bring.

THE MEANS AND INSTRUMENTS

Chou's immediate goal was rapprochement with the US, but one event had to symbolize the policy. He chose a visit from Richard Nixon as his specific goal. Achieving it was no easy task. An elaborate courtship which used both traditional and no-so-traditional tools of diplomacy and propaganda led to success.

Fortunately for Chou, both Nixon and Kissinger believed that a rapprochement with China was in American interests; they too saw an emerging multipolar world in which the US no longer was the single dominant power. An opening to China could make the Kremlin more accommodating, facilitate an end to the Vietnam War, decrease the need for US troops overseas and commitments to reckless regimes in Asia, and increase President Nixon's prestige as a world leader. American liberals supported the idea; they hoped that the recent fighting along the Ussuri would provide an opportunity for a breakthrough.

Upon assuming office in 1969, Nixon began signalling his intent. On the diplomatic front, Nixon talked with go-betweens about his desire to visit China. That summer, the State Department dropped some trade and travel restrictions for China. In November, the US ended naval patrols in the Taiwan Strait, and in January 1970, the Warsaw talks resumed. President Nixon talked of a new relationship in his February 18 State of the World speech; two days later in Warsaw, the Chinese hinted they would welcome a high level delegation.

Events in the Vietnam War and China slowed the process. Chou had

to await the end of a bitter conflict with Lin Piao who favored a hard line towards both Moscow and Washington. Chou won, and Mao finally seemed ready to go along. He invited C.P. Snow, the American historian of the revolution, to join him on the reviewing stand for the National Day celebrations. In April 1971, the Chinese invited an "American envoy" to talks.

Behind the scenes, Kissinger and Chou agreed to meet secretly in Beijing in July 1971. Their rapport was excellent. Although Chou felt compelled on several occasions to deliver a harshly ideological analysis of world events--to which Kissinger responded in kind, he generally cultivated a collaborative negotiating style. Realizing that they had many points of disagreement, the two men sought to establish a common understanding about their world views and the principles which would govern a new U.S.-China relationship. Chou tried to obtain a communique which suggested that Nixon had requested an invitation to China--to discuss Taiwan as a prelude to normalization, but he relented in the face of Kissinger's explanation of American realities, including public opinion. The Chinese agreed to invite President Nixon, with no agenda. Nixon made the formal announcement July 15. The pro-nationalist China lobby was flummoxed.

Further diplomacy was necessary to complete the arrangements for Nixon's February visit. Kissinger's October visit laid the groundwork. It included 25 hours reviewing the world situation and 15 preparing the Shanghai Communique. After a harsh exchange of views about the American draft prompted by Mao, Chou proposed an unusual format which allowed a statement of differences. At the Americans'

request, he agreed to delete the most egregious language in the Chinese statement, and a presentation of common points of view such as opposition to hegemony. On Taiwan, Chou agreed to an ambiguous statement,

"The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Straits maintain there is but one China. The United States Government does not challenge that position."

Throughout this courtship, both sides used public relations or propaganda. It included speeches, ping pong diplomacy and Kissinger's appearances with key Chinese officials in public places.

The Nixon visit itself was a further success for Chou. Nixon was, Kissinger wrote, "a natural partner" for Chou and Mao. Both Chinese leaders again focussed on concepts. Chou expressed sympathy for Vietnam but not a community of interest. He wanted the war to end quickly in order to permit the US to address other issues and areas. For China, Taiwan as an internal problem; the goal was still "peaceful liberation." Nonetheless, Kissinger writes, "Both Mao and Chou left the impression that Taiwan was secondary to an international equilibrium."

THE RESULTS

The results of the rapprochement with the US met many Chinese goals. A fundamental understanding of international issues and national interests had been reached. That understanding provided the basis for a growing relationship which included America's formal diplomatic recognition in 1978, growing trade relations, and expanding

cultural exchanges. Detente helped stabilize the international equilibrium. With America's China card played, the Soviets suddenly moved on issues like disarmament and a summit which were of concern to the United States. China was able to reassert its place in the world; it entered the UN and established relations with many US allies, including Japan. China eventually supported US actions in many areas, especially Japan, western Europe and the Mediterranean. China's influence in the Third World grew, too, even though the appeal of marxist ideology began a slow decline.

China's security remained a key concern, but tensions along the Soviet border also decreased. The Chinese built ICBMs capable of striking the Soviet Union and modernized the Chinese military with an eye to its offensive capabilities. More importantly, economic and political benefits allowed a stronger China to emerge. Throughout the 70s, China could give greater attention to the problems of economic development. The challenges remained immense, and progress was uneven. However, growth rates were generally good, and, with additional means, China inevitably had more options for its foreign policy.

APPLICATIONS

The case of Chou En-lai and the American card point to several lessons for policy makers. First, the world is ever changing; thus, strategy and policy must be evaluated and adjusted when appropriate. Too often, the policy process ends with implementation rather than

evaluation. Secondly, great men can and do affect history. Geopolitics obviously pushed China and the US together, but the fortunate circumstances which placed Chou and Kissinger together, with Mao and Nixon behind, led to a "grand opportunity" for policy makers. By taking it, Chou and Kissinger greatly reduced world tensions and produced new opportunities for both nations. Finally, as de Callieres' notes, "diplomatic success. . . won by methods which confer reciprocal benefits on both parties, must be regarded not only as firmly founded, but as the sure promise of other successes to come." Ultimately, these talks provided the basis for the conduct of US-China relations for the next decade and beyond--what Kissinger called "an extraordinary parallelism in action."

But Chou's opening lies in the past. What of today? Recent events in China and elsewhere in the world may make another evaluation of policy in China and the US in order. Following Tinamen, the Chinese have already announced a reduction in cultural exchanges with Western nations and new training for diplomats. Uncertainty exists about the future Chinese leadership. More pressing international problems such as drugs distract the Bush administration. A grand opportunity may not be available; yet, attention to the process--here, policy evaluation--and the analysis of determinants could help both Chinese and American policy makers identify common interests and thereby, the foundation for relations as they enter the last decade of the twentieth century.